

VERT VERSUS VERRE: VEGETAL VIOLENCE IN J.-K HUYSMANS'S *EN RADE*

Abstract

Beset by financial troubles, Jacques Marles and his wife flee Paris to find safe harbour in a dilapidated rural Château in *En rade* (1887). At first glance, this country setting seems well-equipped with the stereotypical features of pastoral fantasy; however, this article explores how Huysmans uses implicit urban rhetoric and imagery to create a wry subversion of the natural idyll. The comforts of nature are denied to the male subject as the countryside is stripped of its promise of escapism. This article examines, first, Huysmans's use of signifiers of urban unrest to turn nature's exuberance into a corollary for human, revolutionary violence. Secondly, it focuses specifically on glass and glass-breaking at the hands of an aggressive Mother Nature, evoking memories of urban destruction and Parisian civil strife. The association of nature with violence culminates in the invasion of the Château and its looking-glasses by green, the colour of nature — forcing this distressing natural world between man and his own narcissistic reflection. Huysmans reveals that the natural world is no more an ally than the unruly urban masses, and confronts the reader with the inexorable violence of vegetation.

When Joris-Karl Huysmans's Jacques Marles flees financial troubles in Paris, he and his wife Louise seek safe harbour with her peasant uncle and aunt, the — distinctly careless — caretakers of a dilapidated Château in Brie. This country setting in *En rade* (1887)¹ seems at first glance to promise all the stereotypical features of the pastoral: picturesque ruins, flourishing nature, solitude, and a purer lifestyle in tune with the seasons. However, in this novel Huysmans attunes his taste for pastiche and parody to subvert the expectations of a generation brought up on Romantic poetry. The reveries of the protagonist in this country landscape provide none of the reassurance gained by rural wanderers like Hugo's poetic persona in 'La Vie aux champs' or Nerval's first-person narrator in

¹ All references will be to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En rade*, ed. and intro. by Jean Borie (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

‘Sylvie’, nor is he granted the Romantic hero’s privilege of subjectivity, being rendered instead in the third person. The ambiguous free indirect discourse cannot confer on Jacques the rich inspiration or the literary outpourings of his semi-namesake Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or of Chateaubriand and Senancour’s pastoral dreamers; indeed, Jacques’s pen is resistant even to his relatively banal historical studies.

Yet his dissatisfaction is not simply engendered by the existential *ennui* which typically colours the melancholic male’s sojourn in the countryside — as it did for Chateaubriand’s René, Fromentin’s Dominique, and for so many of Maupassant’s rural narrators a few decades later. In works such as these, nature promises the male protagonist a haven; and if, as for René, it does not provide the desired fulfilment, this is not due to nature’s failings but due to the preceding corruption of the male spirit by modernity and by the city. For these writers, the rural environment remains the antithesis of the urban in both its inherent characteristics and in its rhetorical manifestation. In contrast, Huysmans provides a disenchanting portrayal of the pastoral. This has been noted by Julia Pryzbos, who juxtaposes the Château de Lourps park with Zola’s Paradou; she argues persuasively that, unlike Zola, in Huysmans’s countryside, ‘la lutte pour la vie n’est pas le levier du progrès. Au contraire, il semble que cette lutte ne fait que des vaincus’.² Indeed, in *En rade* the rural setting is heavily inscribed not only with Darwinian violence, as Pryzbos indicates, but also with the rhetoric of *urban* violence; the lexicon of destruction found in this novel was one very often associated with war and revolutionary uprising. Nature is no longer personified as a beneficent Mother and is, moreover, given characteristics of the mob and of the civil unrest that repeatedly tore nineteenth-century Paris apart.

² Julia Pryzbos, ‘*En rade*, ou Huysmans entre création et procréation’, in *Joris-Karl Huysmans* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 55–63 (p. 58).

This article examines how Huysmans subtly inverts the habitual, accepted metaphorical connections of the pastoral environment with purity or regeneration, and the urban with corruption and decline. It seeks to explore Huysmans's use of *urban* analogies for the *pastoral* scene, and to examine how his crossing of lexical fields aims to debunk pastoral clichés still popular at the *fin de siècle*. The first section foregrounds ways in which the language of urban violence and revolt are used to change the traditionally peaceful perception of flourishing nature. The second addresses, specifically, glass and glass-breaking within the Château and its chapel; the memories that this may evoke of destruction and civil unrest in Paris for the contemporaneous reader, and the implications that this has for the protagonist's — and the reader's — perception of nature.

In comparison to Huysmans's better known *À rebours* (1884), studies of *En rade* remain relatively scarce. Existing scholarship on this novel has often taken a psychoanalytical approach — justifiably so, given the frequent and less than subtle phallic imagery, the frustrated desires, and the experimental oneiric writing in this novel.³ Brigitte Cabriol gives a psychoanalytical reading of the countryside in *En rade*, seeing the landscape as a projection of Jacques's mental state.⁴ However, rather than continuing this trajectory inwards towards the mind of the protagonist, this article looks

³ Inter alia: Mireille Favier-Richoux on Freudian readings of water imagery in 'Le Thème de l'eau dans *En rade* de Huysmans', in *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 55 (1981), 129–45; Pierre Glaudes on bourgeois desire and marriage in 'L'Imaginaire conjugal dans *En rade* de J.-K. Huysmans', in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 93:1 (1993), 94–115; Natasha Grigorian on the interplay of the visual, dreams, and madness in 'Dreams, Nightmares, and Lunacy in *En rade*: Odilon Redon's Pictorial Imagination in the Writings of J.-K. Huysmans', in *Comparative Critical Studies*, 5:2–3 (2008), 221–33; and Robert Ziegler on oneiric writing and psychoanalysis in 'The Climb into Dream and the Fall into Meaning: Huysmans's *En rade*', in *Excavatio*, 23:1–2 (2008), 61–73.

⁴ Brigitte Cabriol, 'Paysage et souffrance dans *En rade*, de J.-K. Huysmans', *Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans*, 81 (1988), 19–37.

outwards towards the lived experience of the generation of readers in 1887, and it highlights Huysmans's adept allusions to the cultural-historical context. In its more metaphorical and metonymic aspects, this methodology has affinities with Nerema Zuffi and Elio Mosele's readings of space in *En rade*, and with Rae Beth Gordon's in-depth study of the *métaphore filée*.⁵ Zuffi is particularly sensitive to the 'image[s] de destruction et d'anéantissement' in the novel — images which are central to the present article; however, for Zuffi that destruction remains non-specific and the product of time alone.⁶ In contrast, in this reading, recurrent metaphors of violence combine with references beyond the novel, seeking to reconnect *En rade* with other era-specific texts and events, and to further enrich its complex network of meanings for the reader.

Vegetal Violence

French literature had long portrayed the urban by way of the pastoral — the reverse of the manoeuvre we find in *En rade*. Although it was by no means a phenomenon exclusive to the long nineteenth century, Pierre Citron has noted that in the aftermath of 1789, numerous poems portray Paris in ruins as it is reclaimed by nature. For example, Le Tellier's pamphlet *Le Triomphe des Parisiens* (1789) uses a mixture of irony and reverie to depict a victory for Parisians in terms of a return of vegetation and farming to the city streets:

L'herbe croîtra dans les rues, formera une agréable verdure, qui présentera l'aspect d'un jardin à l'anglaise. L'auteur d'un pain mixtionné se rendra fermier de tout le quartier Saint-Honoré jusqu'à la plaine des Sablons pour exciter la culture des pommes de terre, et subvenir

⁵ Nerema Zuffi, 'La Représentation de l'espace dans *En rade*', in *Huysmans: Entre grâce et péché* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), pp. 101–16; Elio Mosele, 'Itinéraires oniriques dans *En rade*', *Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans*, 82 (1989), 3–23; Rae Beth Gordon, 'The Function of the *Métaphore filée* in *En rade*', in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 21 (1993), 449–60.

⁶ Zuffi, 'La Représentation de l'espace dans *En rade*', p. 107.

à votre subsistance. Le quartier Saint-Germain produira de la luzerne; celui de Saint-Jacques et de Sainte-Geneviève, des vignes; le Marais, des fèves et des haricots [...]. Et les hommes seront régénérés.⁷

This use of rural imagery to re-imagine the urban was still very much in vogue some forty years later as Romanticism dominated French literature. Indeed, Citron has noted that vegetal metaphors increase in Parisian poetry from the 1830s; for example, Charles Duveyrier's idealized cityscape in 'La Ville nouvelle ou le Paris des Saint-Simoniens' (1832) privileges greenery and light: 'Je balaierai le vieux temple chrétien, usé et troué, et son cloître de maisons en guenilles; et sur cette place nette, je dresserai une chevelure d'arbres, qui retombera en tresses d'allées sur les deux faces des longues galeries'.⁸ Balzac declared that 'Paris affame ses environs, comme un grand chêne qui ne laisse rien venir sous lui',⁹ and the poet Paul de Magny apostrophized in 1845: 'O vieille Lutèce, tu seras bien plus belle lorsque l'herbe croîtra sur le sol, comme une ample moisson qui à tranchée la faux du temps'.¹⁰

Duveyrier's most illustrious admirer, Charles Baudelaire, later used Romantic, idealizing, natural imagery to pastoralize the urban. This was performed with the view to finding not a physical rural retreat, but a mental urban one, using pastoral imagery to recuperate the urban. Most famously,

⁷ Le Tellier, *Le Triomphe des Parisiens. Par l'auteur du Fanal* (Paris: L'Imprimerie de L. M. Cellot, 1789), p. 6.

⁸ Charles Duveyrier, 'La Ville nouvelle ou le Paris des Saint-Simoniens', in *Paris, ou le Livre des cent-et-un* (Paris: Ladvocat, 1832), VIII, pp. 315–44 (p. 325).

⁹ Balzac, *Lettres à l'Etrangère: œuvres posthumes, 1842–1844*, 4 vols (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1906), II, p. 53, 12–13 July 1842.

¹⁰ Quoted in Pierre Citron, *La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire*, 2 vols (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1961), I, p. 35.

in ‘Paysages’ there is a crossing of poetry’s natural clichés — mist, stars, the moon — with the urban — smog, lamplight, smoke:

Il est doux, à travers les brumes, de voir naître

L’étoile dans l’azur, la lampe à la fenêtre,

Les fleuves de charbon monter au firmament

Et la lune verser son pâle enchantement.¹¹

Although with less aesthetic skill or play on meaning than Baudelaire, a similarly Romantic lexicon appears in the proliferation of tourist guidebooks to the Parisian ruins of 1870–71. For example, in the *Guide à travers les ruines: Paris et ses environs*, Hans and Blanc suggest that: ‘Le ministère des finances, qui n’avait jamais été qu’un monument médiocre, est devenu une ruine superbe. [...] C’est une forêt de pierres, inextricable, pleine d’ombres, fantastique et puissante. La nuit lui prête d’incroyables aspects’.¹² And again: ‘La vue d’ensemble [des ruines de l’Hôtel de Ville] de l’extrémité du pont, est encore la plus merveilleuse. Le monument se présente alors obliquement avec ses fenêtres ouvertes sur le ciel, donnant un paysage d’arbres roussis, comme aux temps d’automne’.¹³ This persists through to the end of the century, with Paris appearing in Zola’s *Paris* (1898) as a field of golden wheat beneath the feet of the aptly-named Pierre Froment.

¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), II, p. 82. Baudelaire’s Paris is, of course, the version of the urban once revered by Jacques in *En rade*, but which he becomes unable to accept in spite of himself once he is living with the reality behind those pastoral clichés.

¹² Ludovic Hans and J.–J. Blanc, *Guide à travers les ruines: Paris et ses environs, avec un plan détaillé* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1871), p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Yet Huysmans empties this rhetorical manoeuvre of all its comforting potential. Rather than the chaos of the city being recuperated by its analogy with nature, in *En rade* the chaos of nature is instead rendered threatening by its analogy with the city. In this novel, the natural environment is imbued not just with an aura of degeneration, as Julia Pryzbos has indicated,¹⁴ but more specifically with the rhetoric of mob violence — and without any sense of expiation. Contrary to the expectations of pastoral idealism, vegetation takes on a violent agency of its own and invades the garden at the Château de Lourps. For example, during the first description of the garden, Jacques is faced with:

un jardin fou, une ascension d'arbres, montant en démente, dans le ciel. [...] Ça et là, dans ces antiques ovales envahis par les orties et par les ronces, de vieux rosiers apparaissaient, retournés à l'état sauvage. [...] Enfin, dans une autre corbeille, des touffes d'absinthe fouettaient des aigrettes d'herbes folles d'une odorante grêle de pastilles d'or. [...] Jacques marcha vers la pelouse, mais le gazon était mort, étouffé par les mousses. [...] Il tenta de suivre une allée dont le dessin était visible encore; les arbres, livrés à eux-mêmes, la barricadaient avec leurs branches. (71)

Note here the lexicon of barbarism and madness (fou, démente, sauvage, folles). Numerous writers condemned the Commune — among other working-class movements of the nineteenth century — using the vocabulary of psychology. For example, Maxime du Camp defines the Commune as 'un accès de pétrolomanie alcoolique',¹⁵ and Coupeau's delirious visions in the asylum cell of Zola's *L'Assommoir* are clearly intended to foreshadow the narrative of the Commune in *La Débâcle*. Both of these, furthermore, link madness to the alcoholism of the masses, indicated obliquely in the above passage with the specific choice of the absinthe plant. Also, there are several verbs and verbal adjectives in this passage which are linked to revolution and violence (envahi, fouetter, étouffé,

¹⁴ Julia Pryzbos, 'En rade, ou Huysmans entre création et procréation', pp. 57–58.

¹⁵ Maxime du Camp, 'Les Aliénés de Paris', in *La Revue des deux mondes* (October 1872), np.

barricader), highlighting the powerful, engaged, deliberate quality of this active uprising of vegetation.

In the light of this rhetoric of active rebellion, I would nuance one point of Pryzbos's argument; she notes that, unlike the procreation at work in Zola's *Paradou*, 'Huysmans insiste sur la stérilité et la dégénérescence de la nature' and that natural world at Lourps is 'un enfer putréfié et infécond'.¹⁶ She identifies in support of this that there are no pleasant herbs, the fruits are worm-eaten, and the vegetables inedible. Yet far from sterility or infertility, we do in fact see here exuberant growth and the perpetuation of the cycle of life. There *are abundant* shrubs, fruits, and wild plants in abundance; but they appear sterile only because they lack edibility, utility, or aesthetic appeal for the protagonist. The garden is only 'un enfer putréfié et infécond *pour Jacques*'. Indeed, the local peasants seem oblivious to the unruly dominance of less appealing plants. The fact that it is specifically for the bourgeois protagonist and through his free indirect discourse that this garden becomes an unsettling dystopia reflects that the rural vegetation, like the urban 'animalistic' working classes, refuses bourgeois desires and domination.

The rhetoric of rebellion is taken further later in the description of vegetation quoted above; the plants are given human characteristics, and are thus further analogized with the working classes who were so often depicted in highly corporeal terms by the bourgeoisie.¹⁷ We see the body parts of

¹⁶ Julia Pryzbos, 'En rade, ou Huysmans entre création et procréation', pp. 57–58.

¹⁷ Huysmans himself demonstrates this corporeality in a number of his prose sketches: for example, in his depictions of dancers at 'Les Folies Bergères en 1879' and of 'Une goguette', where his narrator sees 'des couples échauffés près des litres vides, dominés, comme dans un apothéose, par une énorme fille en cheveux, debout, le corsage dégrafé dans lequel un mécanicien plonge, en ricanant, une grosse patte noire' (J.-K. Huysmans, *Croquis parisiens*, in *Œuvres complètes de J.-K. Huysmans* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1972 [1880]), VIII, p. 185).

a crowd of trees, many of which seem to bear the scars of a violent conflict: '[ils] emmêlaient leurs bras dans les têtes percluses de vieux pommiers, aux troncs écuissés, aux plaies pansées par des lichens; des buissons de baguenaudes agitaient leurs gousses de taffetas gommé sous des arbres bizarres [...] d'où sortaient des petits doigts onglés, humides et roses' (72). This humanization of vegetation is emphasized by antithesis as Jacques animalizes all the other people in the novel. In the opening passage, creditors in Paris are depicted as a pack of wild dogs who sniffed out his financial ruin and have hounded him out of town by howling furiously at his door (41). Furthermore, this animalization extends across the urban/rural divide to the peasantry, who are contented to live alongside their animals, covered in filth; this is illustrated when Jacques points out some dirt on Antoine's face, and the latter gives the jocular exclamation, 'Ben, c'est des chiures!' (92). Parallels are drawn between Jacques's wife and their adopted cat; Louise's mysterious medical complaint is strangely similar to the feline's more rapid illness and demise. Unlike in Zola's *La Terre*, published just a few months after *En rade*, it is not only the rural peasantry who are dehumanized; rather, urban shopkeepers, rural peasants, and women in general are *all* unnervingly animal. Contrary to Chris Ferns's assertion that, in utopian literature, 'the natural, organic character of the rural world is inalterably opposed to the controlling human design of dystopian society',¹⁸ here the habitual utopian associations of the pastoral environment are undermined by the diminished distinction between the human animal and the animals of the wider natural world.

The link between the violence of nature and the violence of the urban masses is even made explicit by Huysmans after the garden's vegetal revolt has been developed over several pages. We learn that: 'Jacques songeait à ce cynique brigandage de la nature si servilement *copié par l'homme*. Quelle jolie chose que les foules végétales et que les peuples!' (73 – my emphasis) This rural retreat is clearly no return to Eden; indeed, reminders of urban violence such as these go beyond merely

¹⁸ Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 121.

ensuring that the bourgeois city-dwellers cannot forget their urban troubles during their pastoral seclusion. Rather, the imposition of a rhetoric associated with political, class-based violence onto this pastoral scene places nature as a direct *precursor* to urban violence: vegetation, it transpires, has *taught* the masses to revolt.

Glass and Glass-breaking

This urban-rural lexical intermingling is emphasized further for Huysmans's contemporaneous reader by the more specific references to the destruction of glass. Contrary to Walter Benjamin's claims that glass is a material to which memories cannot cling and which has no aura,¹⁹ the repeated return to the imagery of *broken* glass in the crises of the nineteenth century suggests that once glass has been shattered, it may become a privileged material symbol of violence and rebellion. This will be expanded upon subsequently, but first it should be noted that what is striking in this novel is that glass is shattered at the hands of nature not human conflict. The *damaged* state of the glass is a recurrent subject of description in the rooms of the Château and chapel; it is nature — the weather, an elder tree, owls, animals — which not only degrades the building in general terms, but, more specifically, does so by rupturing its vitreous boundaries. When Jacques first arrives in the Château, he notes that: 'Par les vitres brisées, le vent s'engouffrait, remuant l'ombre amoncelée sous la voûte, secouant les portes dont les battants geignaient, à des étages supérieurs, en l'air' (48). As he explores the old library, the broken glass of a bookcase and window dominate his perception, and shards crackle below his feet:

C'était l'ancienne bibliothèque du château; les armoires avaient perdu leurs vitres dont les éclats craquaient sous ses souliers, dès qu'il bougeait; le plafond se cuvait par places, s'écaillait, pleuvait les pellicules de ses plâtres sur la poudre du verre qui sablait le plancher

¹⁹ See 'Erfahrung und Armut' in *Walter Benjamin: Ein Lesebuch*, ed. by Michael Opitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Leipzig, 1996), pp. 621–22.

de petites lueurs; derrière lui, le jeune homme s'aperçut qu'un sureau poussait, au travers d'une fenêtre crevée, dans la pièce. (87)

The first images given of the chapel also focus on the broken windows:

[L'église] était éclairée par des rangées de fenêtres se faisant face, des fenêtres en ogive à courtes lancettes, mais dans quel état! les pointes des lancettes cassées, rafistolées avec des morceaux de ciment et des bouts de briques, les verrières remplacées par des vitres divisées en de faux losanges de papier de plomb ou laissées, telles quelles, vides, la voûte éraillée perdant les escharres de sa peau de plâtre. (201)

Here glass is broken down by the violence of *nature*. As Zuffi acknowledges, the window can no longer hold the outside world out: 'la fenêtre n'a pas la fonction d'opposer [...] un intérieur, un lieu clos protecteur, et un extérieur hostile. Elle suggère à l'inverse, une corrélation entre ces deux espaces, le dehors et le dedans, également livrés à l'agression d'une pluie diluvienne et envahissante.'²⁰

This recurrent imagery plays on the memory of glass as a privileged symbol in the representation of urban violence throughout the long nineteenth century. This began in 1789 when glass, then a luxury item, was intrinsically linked with the fall of the aristocracy and Church; one visitor to France noted: 'Who could, without emotion, behold the windows broken and barred up, [...] where all was gaiety and splendour',²¹ and the thirty-nine low-level stained-glass windows of the Pantheon were walled up to signal the appropriation of the building by the Revolutionaries and to

²⁰ Zuffi, 'La Représentation de l'espace dans *En rade*', p. 105.

²¹ Quoted in William Scott, *Terror and Repression in Revolutionary Marseilles* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 10.

obliterate its ecclesiastical appearance.²² Subsequently, with the development of mass production techniques for glass and the progress of Haussmannization, vitreous surfaces became increasingly pervasive in monumental, bourgeois, nineteenth-century Paris — leaving vast, fragile surfaces which could easily fall victim to urban unrest. For example, in 1869–70, lantern smashing was a popular sign of protest against Louis-Napoléon; Henri Dabot noted in his diary on 11 June 1869: ‘Hier soir, nouvelles manifestations, nouveaux troubles; les réverbères du boulevard Ménilmontant ont été brisés par une bande d’émeutiers’.²³

However, of all the crises of the preceding century, the violent destruction of glass would be most reminiscent of the *année terrible* for the majority of readers in 1887. During the Prussian siege, the monumental vitreous buildings of Paris were very often shattered by the seven thousand shells of the siege. Indeed, from September 1870 to the end of the bombardment, there are strikingly frequent newspaper reports about the boarding up and destruction of windows across the city — too banal a topic to merit reporting, one might have thought. This is particularly the case in the *Journal officiel de la République*, which noted windows being protected against damage at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the Sainte-Chapelle, and the Louvre;²⁴ it advised those living near street level to place mattresses against their windows;²⁵ and it detailed numerous explosions such as the one in the Passage de

²² Marie-Hélène Huet, ‘Unsettled Memories: the Revolution Buries its Dead’, in *Unfinished Revolutions: Legacies of Upheaval in Modern French Culture*, ed. by Robert T. Denomé and Roland H. Simon (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 121–37 (p. 128).

²³ Henri Dabot, *Griffonages quotidiens d’un bourgeois du quartier latin, de mai 1869 au 2 décembre 1871* (Péronne: E. Quentin, 1895), p. 4.

²⁴ *Le Journal officiel de la République*, 26 September 1870; 2 October 1870; 25 September and 5 October 1870 (np.).

²⁵ *Le Journal officiel*, 13 January 1871 (np.).

l'Opéra which 'offrait l'image du plus effrayant désordre. Tout était brisé, haché, confondu; les glaces, les vitrines avaient été réduites en menus fragments. [...] La boutique faisant face à celle de l'armurier avait eu sa devanture brisée; la commotion avait également brisée les vitres de plusieurs magasins du voisinage'.²⁶ The hothouse at the Jardin des Plantes was the most-cited victim in contemporaneous diaries and journalism: an anonymous garde nationale noted in his mémoire that 'la serre des orchidées du Jardin des Plantes avait été complètement détruite par un obus prussien. Deux magnifiques camellias survécurent seuls au désastre';²⁷ the *Journal officiel* also recorded that 'les fameuses serres du Muséum, qui n'avaient point de rivales dans le monde, sont détruits'.²⁸ In the collective community narrative, there is an impulsive return to the destruction of this glass building, used by man to domesticate nature; an image which will be echoed in *En rade* by inversion, as all-powerful nature destroys the glass of man's own domestic shelter.

The destruction of glass during the Prussian siege was made all the more memorable by being perpetuated during the urban violence of the Commune, despite the significant differences in the nature of the combat. The infernos of the Commune left large swathes of the city with gaping, blackened voids in place of glittering window panes, and innumerable photographic albums kept this memory alive long after the repairs.²⁹ Edmond de Goncourt specifically mentions the destruction of

²⁶ *Le Journal officiel*, 16 February 1871 (np.).

²⁷ *Souvenirs d'un garde nationale pendant le Siège de Paris et sous la Commune par un volontaire suisse: La Capitulation* (Neuchâtel: J. Sandoz, 1871), p. 209.

²⁸ *Le Journal officiel*, 10 January 1871 (np.)

²⁹ Including the photographic collections: *Photographies du siège de la Commune* (Paris: Lecourt, nd.); *Ruines de paris, mai 1871* (Paris: npub., 1871); and H. de Bleignerie's *Paris incendié 1871. Album historique contenant: I. historiques, par H. de Bleignerie; II. Notice sur les monuments, les rues incendiées, par E. Dangin; III. Vingt photographies artistiques des plus remarquables ruines de Paris* (Paris: A. Jarry, 1871). The latter of these is available online at:

glass more than thirty-five times in his accounts of the Prussian bombardment and the *semaine sanglante*. He notes, for example, that: ‘Les rues par lesquelles je passe n’ont plus un seul carreau. On marche sur de la poussière de vitre, et je vois une marchande de verre cassé, remplir, en un instant, sa voiture, du verre qu’elle ramasse à pleine main de fer,’ and that in his house ‘on marche sur les plâtras et les fragments de glaces mêlés aux éclats d’obus et aux balles’.³⁰ Indeed, the experience of walking on crackling glass, presumably a common one during this *année terrible*, is resonant in Jacques’s experience of walking through the glass-strewn library of the Château in Chapter 3 (quoted above).

In case the reader of *En rade* had missed the symbolic association of glass with the *semaine sanglante*, the infernos of May 1871 are evoked repeatedly in this novel through billowing, fiery cloud formations and images of calcination. Notably, these visions are always described as distressing for the bourgeois Jacques Marles, suggesting that the rural weather and lighting may produce troubling reminders of the fragility of bourgeois, Republican society. For example, at the very opening of the novel, the sunset transfigures the clouds into fiery flumes and the Château into a blackened ruin amid a lexicon of warfare and destruction:

Les nuées *guerroyantes* du ciel s’étaient enfuies; au solennel fracas du couchant *en feu*, avait succédé le morne silence d’un firmament de *cedre*; ça et là, pourtant, des *braises* mal consumées *rougeoyaient* dans *la fumée* des nuages et éclairaient le château par derrière, rejetant l’arête rouge du toit, les hauts corps de cheminée, deux tours coiffées de bonnets en éteignoir, l’une carrée et l’autre ronde. Ainsi éclairé, le château semblait *une ruine calcinée*,

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8432427j.r=Paris+incendi%C3%A9+1871+Album+historique+contenant%3A.langEN> [accessed 10 October 2014].

³⁰ Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire, 1870–1871* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935), pp. 240–41.

derrière laquelle *un incendie mal éteint couvait*. [...] La vision de ce château qui paraissait brûler sourdement encore, exaspéra son état d'agitation nerveuse. (45 – my emphases)

Further, images of an incandescent sky recur several times in this initial chapter, framing Jacques's (and the reader's) first perceptions of the pastoral setting. The barn is surmounted by 'des fleuves silencieux de nuées rouges' (43). Jacques walks towards the chapel, 'regardant s'avancer vers lui ce bâtiment percé de fenêtres qui, se faisant vis-à-vis au travers de la nef, flambaient traversées par l'incendie des nuages' (44). And again, 'cette église noire et rouge, à jour, ces croisées semblables [...] lui parurent sinistres. [...] Des ondes cramoisies continuaient à déferler dans le ciel.' (44). Ironically, it is not the local peasantry here who ransack the Saint-Phal estate; the name of the road connecting estate and village, the Chemin du Feu, testifies to the fact that the local peasants did not torch the Château during Revolutionary action, but instead saved it from fire. Rather, it is *nature* which renders the Château and chapel — albeit through a trick of the light — as carbonized ruins; unnervingly akin to those ruins which so brutally reconfigured the Parisian skyline in the summer of 1871, and which had still not been entirely repaired by 1887. The natural world greets Jacques's arrival in the first chapter with a declaration of war.

Indeed, glass windows in *En rade* also refuse the 'naturalistic' transparency of the window in Zola's novels. While so many of Zola's protagonists gain understanding as they gaze from the advantageous position of the window (a visual device which also frequently drives the narrative forward), Jacques remains unable to rationalize his surroundings from the window's elevated position.³¹ The one lingering gaze from a window which we share with Jacques is thwarted by the

³¹ Ilona Chessid includes windows in her study of thresholds in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* (*Thresholds of Desire: Authority and Transgression in the Rougon-Macquart* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993)); Naomi Schor identifies the play of vision and gazes from windows in the same series ('From Window to Window', in *Yale French Studies*, 42 (1969), pp. 38–51); and Philip Walker

weather, as ‘[la pluie] coulait sans discontinuer, rayant l’air de ses fils, dévidant son clair écheveau en diagonale, éclaboussant les perrons, claquant sur les vitres, crépitant sur le zinc des tuyaux, délayant plus loin la plaine, fondant les buttes, gâchant les routes’ (171). The rural landscape and weather conspire to refuse the bourgeois eye the visual domination and the subsequent mastery of knowledge that it has come to expect. The only clear image of the outside world gained from a window is the novel’s one reprise after Chapter 1 of the fiery, *semaine sanglante* weather: Jacques sees ‘des nuages pareils à des fumées d’incendie [qui] fuyaient en hâte et s’écrapaient sur des côtes lointaines’ (172). It is not only Naturalism, in general terms, that Huysmans parodies here by rendering its viewpoint a blind-spot but, moreover, the naïve supposition that nature should be the ally of civilized man and Progress rather than his enemy.

Verre versus vert

As the French endeavoured to move beyond the traumatic events of the *année terrible* there was a substantial medieval revival, motivated by a desire to engage with an era of French national strength in Europe.³² This included a widespread admiration for stained glass: a museum dedicated to stained glass opened in the Palais de l’Industrie in 1885; the stained-glass windows in the 1889 Galerie des Machines self-reflexively celebrated glass-making as one the great artisanal practices of medieval France; and Symbolist painters such as Emile Bernard, Paul Sérusier, and Pierre Bonnard drew on the stylistic traits of stained glass. Indeed, these *cloisonnistes* often incorporated floral and vegetal images into their works, not least in their recurrent depictions of Breton farming and woodland, thus gesturing towards the organic imagery which would characterize the Art Nouveau. All such

discusses reflections and lines of sight in Zola’s writing (‘The Mirror, the Window and the Eye in Zola’s Fiction’, in *Yale French Studies*, 42 (1969), pp. 52–67).

³² This is analyzed in detail by Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz in *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siècle France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

manifestations of stained glass suggest the enthusiasm for positioning modern, Republican France as the legitimate heir to former national greatness and as the natural-born leaders of Progress. This mass self-delusion had already been mocked by Flaubert in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) when the eponymous protagonists install a (probably fake) Valois stained-glass window into their rural retreat³³ — a rural setting, moreover, which rather playfully withholds the satisfaction they had sought away from Paris throughout the novel. This mockery is taken a step further in *En rade*. By choosing to destroy glass — including the stained glass in the chapel — Huysmans simultaneously shatters two of the bourgeois delusions dear to Flaubert's copyists; that of the natural idyll and that of the nostalgic idyll.³⁴

Furthermore, Huysmans establishes a recurrent, homonymous relationship between glass (*verre*) and green (*vert*), and this deftly encapsulates his deconstruction of pastoral idealism and the foregrounding of the violence of nature. Huysmans draws together green (as a metonym for aggressive vegetation) and glass (as a metonym for urban aggression) into single images which are replete with tension. For example, green creeps beyond its designated place in the garden to invade the otherwise dank and dingy descriptions of the Château interior, and ultimately to invade Jacques's mind. As he becomes submerged in this rural environment, green-ness signposts the unnerving quality of his neurotic dreams. As he drifts into his first dream of Esther, the green wallpaper of the bedroom metamorphoses into myriad green gemstones:

³³ Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Garnier, 1965 [1881]), p. 125.

³⁴ This complements the ironic treatment of Progress and Naturalism in the ptomaines chapter, which has been skilfully analysed by Carmen Mayer-Robin ('Carcass or Currency? Marketing Ptomaines in Huysmans' *En rade*', in *Currencies: Fiscal Fortune and Cultural Capital in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. by Sarah Capitanio, Lisa Downing, Paul Rowe and Nicholas White (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 43–58.

Soudain un phénomène bizarre se produisit: les bâtons verts des treilles ondulèrent, tandis que le fond saumâtre du lambris se ridait tel qu'un cours d'eau. [...] Un brasier qu'alimentaient les tisons minéraux des feuilles taillées dans les lueurs différentes du vert, dans les lueurs vert-lumière de l'émeraude, prasines du péridot, glauques de l'aigue-marine, jaunâtres du zircon, céruléennes du béryl. (58–59)

In the final dream of the novel, in which Jacques is trapped in a towering well, one of the first elements described in his surroundings are: 'des tuyaux d'étoffe verte, [...] puis, fixés à de longs clous, des schapskas pistache' (188). Moreover, later in the same dream, imagery of green, glass, and violence all combine, as Jacques imagines himself trapped behind a glass wall, watching a distorted Ophelia figure drown and have her eyes burned out in green water:

Et voilà que maintenant la cour s'éclairait et que le grand mur du fond, appuyé sur une maison voisine, se muait en une immense paroi de verre, derrière laquelle clapotait une masse turbulente d'eau. [...] Au ras des pavés, derrière la cloison de verre, une tête surgit dans l'eau, une tête renversée de femme. [...] [Jacques] s'élança pour secourir cette malheureuse, entendit subitement derrière la cloison de verre, deux coups secs, comme le choc de deux billes sautant sur un corps dur. Et les yeux de la femme, ses yeux bleus et fixes avaient disparu. Il ne restait plus, à leur place, que deux creux rouges qui flambaient, tels que des brûlots, dans l'eau verte. (194–95)

These two metonyms — green and glass — are not only distressing in Jacques's dreams, but are also brought to the fore in the disruption of Narcissism. The one unbroken mirror in the Château is described as 'une petite glace verdâtre dont le tain coulé picotait l'eau de virgules de vif-argent' (48). This greenish mirror in this green-papered room with a window overlooking the swarming green plants of the garden is the sinister culmination of Jacques's first impression of the Château; rather than providing Jacques with a reassuring, self-affirming reflection, this looking-glass fills Jacques with pure discomfort. Indeed, from its position at the very beginning of the novel, the

unnerving impression of this first ‘glace verdâtre’ will be mirrored textually in the ‘vitres couleur d’eau’ of the Château (69) and the ‘fenêtres dont les vitres en vis-à-vis paraissaient contenir une eau ténébreuse et trouble’ (104) in the chapel. This mirror forms a focal point for all the challenges Jacques must face in this rural *rade*; his fragile selfhood, his bourgeois class anxiety, his realization of the fallacy of the pastoral ideal, and his crumbling marriage. After all, while Jacques finds this green looking-glass highly disturbing, it is notable that his wife Louise experiences no such distress; instead, ‘[elle] l’examinait avec complaisance et souriait à la glace qui lui renvoyait son visage décoloré par l’eau verte’ (48).

Moreover, the distressing nature of glass invaded by green is particularly notable as it forms a striking intertext with Huysmans’s Decadent masterpiece, *À rebours* (1884). In both texts, the protagonist’s looking-glass is overwhelmed by a green watery-ness, it refuses to provide the comforts of narcissism, and thus it undermines masculine selfhood. Not only are these novels linked ambiguously by the Château de Lourps itself (which Des Esseintes is supposed to have sold in perfect repair in *À rebours* shortly before Jacques Marles inhabits it in a state of absolute ruin in *En rade*), but they are also connected by Des Esseintes’s ‘longue glace en fer forgé, emprisonnant ainsi que d’une margelle argentée de lune, l’eau verte et comme morte du miroir’.³⁵ The dead ‘eau verte’ of the mirror never returns Des Esseintes’s image at all in *À rebours*, despite the water metaphor creating an aqueous parity with Narcissus’s pool. Indeed, the green quality of the water evokes the lush glade of the original Narcissus story; far from the comforting and necessary illusions of Narcissism which would generally be emphasized by Freud, these green, aqueous glass pools remind the reader of the terrible watery fate of the legend’s vain protagonist. In both novels, the green, watery looking-glasses deny the men their selfhood. Despite the considerable differences in the aesthetics and the ethics of the two men, the aristocratic Des Esseintes and the bourgeois Jacques Marles are united by the failed fantasies of their rural interludes. Once the natural retreat from urban

³⁵ J.–K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 198.

life becomes a reality, they are both left contemplating their crumbling selfhood in the face of green glass, horrifyingly unable to control various aspects of corporeal and vegetal nature. Whereas the emerging Art Nouveau movement sought organic imagery in order to return a positive, natural simplicity to art and design at the turn of the century, Huysmans firmly dispels the illusion that nature provides a viable alternative for the ills of urban society.

Of course, Huysmans is not content merely to destabilize the bourgeoisie's means of escapism. He also presents the reader with a sardonic reminder of the bourgeoisie's skill for strategic forgetting. Jacques dreams of a modest little house in the suburbs as an alternative to the troubles experienced at both the couple's central urban apartment and at the Château de Lourps (124). The Parisian suburbs — mid-way between urban and rural — linger as lasting evidence of the bourgeoisie's need for comforting delusion. Moreover, the Huysmans reader familiar with the *Croquis parisiens* of 1880 may recognize the author's comic cruelty in putting Jacques through this defeat by nature at all. Huysmans had already written on the benefits of the semi-rural, semi-urban Rue de la Chine as a comforting solution for the conventionally melancholic Parisian. Notably, this is described as a *havre* — that *rade* in search of which Jacques is made to suffer fruitlessly in the countryside, when Huysmans had already identified it in the 20^e arrondissement some seven years earlier:

C'est, sous un grand ciel, un sentier de campagne où la plupart des gens qui passent semblent avoir mangé et avoir bu; c'est le coin souhaité par les artistes en quête de solitude; c'est *le havre* imploré par les âmes endolories qui ne demandent plus qu'un bienfaisant repos loin de la foule; c'est pour les déshérités du sort et pour les écrasés de la vie, une consolation, un soulagement qui naît de l'inévitable vue de l'hôpital Tenon. [...] Il est vrai qu'une fois rentré dans le cœur de la ville, l'on se répète avec raison peut-être qu'un accablant ennui vous opprimerait dans l'isolement de la maisonnette, dans le silence et dans l'abandon du chemin; et pourtant, chaque fois que l'on vient se retremper dans la douce et triste rue, l'impression

reste la même; il semble que l'oubli et que la paix cherchés au loin dans la contemplation de monotones plages se trouveraient là.³⁶

The tongue-in-cheek reiteration of this predilection for the suburbs in the closing episodes of *En rade* reinforces the folly of pastoral fantasy. Furthermore, as soon as a return to Paris and the possibility of realizing this suburban dream becomes a reality for Jacques, he has a pure moment of romanticizing reverie — behind which we sense an evident note of authorial derision. We are told that ‘[Jacques] se sentit le cœur serré, en passant pour la dernière fois sous le berceau des allées désertes, en regardant les grelots des grappes de vigne enroulées dans les pagodes à clochettes des vieux pins’ (222). Rose-tinted glasses are provided with Jacques’s train tickets; but with this very fickleness, Huysmans offers the reader a closing image of the foolishness of the dreamer duped by the pastoral. Playing on the cultural-historical context of its publication, *En rade* transposes symbolic associations with urban revolutionary events to a rural setting — typified by the images of glass-breaking — to show that Mother Nature is not the despairing parent of an unruly urban child; rather, the child takes after its disreputable parent.

³⁶ J.–K. Huysmans, *Croquis parisiens*, p. 128, my emphasis.